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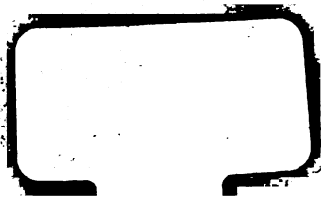
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Walden

VEDĀNTA PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE

ON

THE USE OF RELIGION

BY

ELLEN WALDO.

"It is as necessary to distinguish between Religion and *a* religion, as between Language and *a* language."—*India, What can it teach us?* by MAX MÜLLER, Lect. III.

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THE USE OF RELIGION

The Vedânta Philosophy is more than *a* religion, more than one form of religion amongst many other forms. It is well to clearly understand at the outset that it deals entirely with the essential verities common to all religions, rather than with the non-essential details of doctrines and dogmas. It aims to teach man what he is, to make it clear to him how limitless are his possibilities, and to show him that these can be actualized in many different ways. It seeks to solve for him the problem of life, to place before him a rational, simple explanation of his real nature. It tells him the way has been found to the realm of light and immortality, and that he can reach it by his own effort. It goes even farther, and tells him that he will in the end attain the goal; that experience will unconsciously, but surely, lead him to the realization of his divinity. The keynote of the Vedânta is its universality. Prof. Max Müller says of it, after a lifetime of study and research, that it is "the most sublime philosophy and the most satisfying religion." It may be asked, "Why does man need religion, why can he not dispense with all inquiry into the subject and lead just as good and useful a life without any religion at all?" To answer this question will be the endeavor of this paper. Let us take first the facts in the case — what are the facts about religion? Just here I wish to make as plain as possible the difference between Religion and *a* religion. It is very much the same as between Language and *a* language. To quote again from Prof. Max Müller, who has practically spent a long life in the study of these two subjects: "A man may accept *a* religion, he may be converted to the Christian religion, and he may change his own particular religion from time to time, just as he may speak a different language; but in order to have *a* religion, a man

must have religion. He must *at least* once in his life have looked beyond the horizon of this world, and carried away in his mind an impression of the Infinite, which will never leave him again. A being satisfied with the world of sense, unconscious of its finite nature, undisturbed by the limited or negative character of all perceptions of the senses, would be incapable of any religious concepts. Only when the finite character of all human knowledge has been perceived is it possible for the human mind to conceive that which is beyond the finite — call it what you like — the Beyond, the Unseen, the Infinite, the Supernatural, the Divine. That step must have been taken before religion of any kind becomes possible. What kind of religion it will be depends on the character of the race which elaborates it, its surroundings in nature, and its experience in history.” When Max Müller speaks of religion itself as not to be confounded with any one religion in particular, he must refer to that certain something which is common to everything bearing the name of religion. The word religion is what is called a concept, just as the word tree, or the word man, is a concept. That is, the human mind has abstracted from innumerable concrete examples a general idea of certain qualities that must belong to every particular tree, qualities which must be present to constitute a tree as distinct from everything else in the known world.

It would be too long a process to attempt to show how this is done, but we are all familiar with the result, we are all able to at once describe a certain object as a tree, even if we never before saw one of that particular kind. We can even follow the idea into the realms of imagination, and picture to ourselves such trees as never existed on earth, without the least doubt as to what we mean when we call these creations of our fancy “trees.” With religion, we have more difficulty, because it is entirely a mental concept, without actual physical shape, so to speak. Still the same thing must be true about it. Before we can call anything a religion we must have in our minds some idea, however vague, of what religion means to us.

What, then, is the one idea common to every religion, which must be present to give it a distinctive character as a religion? It is not a belief in God, or soul, or immortality, or Heaven, or Hell, because we find one of the great religions of the world which entirely omits all these ideas. Yet no student of the subject would for an instant hesitate to classify Buddhism as a religion, and a very great one. The one common element in everything called by the name of religion is man's attempt to penetrate beyond the world of the senses. Inherent in the very constitution of man is the necessity to relate himself with that which is above and beyond the limits of the seen world. From the most ignorant savage, whose worship is of the crudest kind, to the most intellectual philosopher, or the most advanced scientist, man is eternally finding himself confronted with an unknown Beyond. Every science, when pushed to its ultimate, reaches what modern philosophy calls the "Unknowable." The most subtle reasoning cannot penetrate that "dead wall" that limits even the keenest intellect. Just here, then, when man has, as Max Müller so well expresses it, "at least once in his life looked beyond the horizon of this world and carried away in his mind an impression of the Infinite" — just here religion begins for that man. Prof. Daniel G. Brinton, of the University of Pennsylvania, claims that religion takes its rise in the mental sub-consciousness. By this he appears to mean that religious ideas spring from something deeper than conscious reasoning. The expression, *super-conscious*, made use of by the Vedânta, seems to me a more correct one, and one that more clearly conveys the idea that religion springs from a source beyond the ordinary state of the human mind, from a plane beyond intellect, a plane which has been reached by many men, and which can be reached by every human being who will make the same effort that they made. Revelation is not the property of any age or race, of any Prophet or Teacher, however great; it is the birthright of humanity, the natural outcome of the inherent Divinity that is the real nature of man.

We often hear the phrase, "science of religion," but it is not quite a correct one. What is really meant is, that there are scientific methods of studying religion. Among these methods the simplest is what is known as the Historical method, which gives us the facts in the history of religion, without any attempt at deducing from them any theory about their meaning. In this field of research, there is little or no difference of opinion among students. All well verified facts are beyond dispute *as facts*, but when the attempt is made to give a reason for the existence of these facts, the way is opened for endless differences of opinion. It is not hard to see that a thing exists, but the problem of the ages has ever been *why* it exists, and the question may never be solved. The next step in the scientific method of studying religion is the Comparative method; that is, after all available facts about different religions have been collected, to place the more important ones side by side, and endeavor to understand their significance in the light shed by each upon the other, to extract, as it were, the one element common to them all. This common element, as I mentioned before, is the essential factor in all religions, is that which causes us to distinguish the idea of religion from all other ideas. Studying religion in this way, it is most interesting, nay, it is most astonishing, to find how even the lowest, crudest form of so-called superstition has in it much that is distinctly related to the most advanced philosophical ideas. In fact, in many instances the growth of these higher concepts can be plainly traced as they evolved from the lower notions. As we progress in this study and rise to a consideration of the highest forms in religious expression, we gradually approach the sublime form expressed in Vedānta philosophy. In other religions only results have been preserved, but in most instances the processes by which man slowly reached these results were thrown away as useless. To the student of religion from the scientific standpoint, however, nothing can be more valuable and necessary than to be able to observe the steps in the evolution of religion, and that is why the sacred

literature of India is so important to those who wish to trace this evolutionary process as clearly as possible. The Indian Sages and Rishis were wise enough to preserve almost all the steps by which they climbed the heights of realization. The Hindu scriptures are unique in the whole history of religion, in that in them are to be found records of very primitive forms, side by side with the loftiest utterances of the human mind. As Max Müller expresses it, "It is exactly this period in the growth of ancient religion which was always presupposed or postulated, but was absent everywhere else, that is clearly put before us in the hymns of the Rig-Veda. It is this ancient chapter in the history of the human mind which has been preserved to us in Indian literature, while we look for it in vain in Greece, or Rome, or elsewhere." And the reason Prof. Müller gives for the fact that India alone has preserved so many records of her religious evolution is a most beautiful and instructive one. Let me once more quote his own words: "Now let us look to the ancient inhabitants of India. With them, first of all, religion was not only *one* interest by the side of many; it was the all-absorbing interest; it embraced not only worship and prayer, but what we call philosophy, morality, law and government — all was pervaded by religion. Their whole life was to them a religion — everything else was, as it were, a mere concession made to the ephemeral requirements of this life." Is it any wonder that such a people should have been the one to arrive at the highest truths of religion and philosophy? This directing of the whole national energy into one channel, so to speak, naturally led to the grandest possible results. That is why, to-day, Indian thought is making itself so powerfully felt in the Western world.

All our advanced civilization, our wonderful conquests in every realm of science, our marvellous inventions, our luxurious material prosperity, have been insufficient to satisfy the demands of man's higher nature. Fortunately they have not even been able to stifle that yearning inherent in man's very nature, that inevitable reaching out for something real, some-

thing permanent, something fully satisfying. That something is God, for, called by any name man's thought can frame, that Eternal Reality is what we mean when we say God. It is undoubtedly somewhat humiliating to our pride to find that, at a period when our ancestors were painting their bodies in lieu of clothes, and dwelling in caves and forests, these ancient Hindus had not only developed a high state of material civilization, but were familiar with ideas that to us sound decidedly modern, and which in many instances exactly coincide with the views accepted by the most advanced minds at this end of the nineteenth century. But after the first shock to our wounded vanity is over, if we are sincere and earnest, we can well afford to put our pride in our pocket and listen respectfully to what these sages have to teach us. You must pardon me if I once more quote to you the words of Max Müller. I do so because he is perhaps better acquainted with Indian literature and history than almost any western man of this century, and because he himself has been gradually, but irresistibly, drawn into a fuller and fuller admission of the grandeur of Hindu thought as expressed in the sublime teachings of the Vedânta philosophy. If you feel any doubt as to whether these "heathen" have anything of value to teach us, whether it is worth our while to study what they can tell us, and endeavor to understand their point of view, even if we do not accept their conclusions, it may be of use to you to at least consider the words of one who certainly has earned the right to respectful consideration — and his words have no uncertain sound. He says: "I maintain, then, that for a study of man, or, if you like, for a study of Aryan humanity, there is nothing in the world equal in importance with the Veda. I maintain that to everybody who cares for himself, for his ancestors, for his history, or for his intellectual development, a study of Vedic literature is indispensable: and that as an element of liberal education it is far more important and far more improving than the reigns of Babylonian and Persian Kings; aye, even than the dates and deeds of many of the Kings of Judah and

Israel." Hardly any expression could be more emphatic than this, and it shows very plainly how deep must have been the impression left on the speaker's mind by his researches into Indian sacred lore, which researches have done so much to arouse the interest of others in pursuing similar studies. These words of Prof. Müller, first uttered in 1882, he reiterates with unabated vigor in 1892, showing that the intervening years, while bringing him much added knowledge in the field of Vedic literature, had only confirmed, and even strengthened, his opinion of the great value and importance of the teachings of the Vedas, and more especially the Upanishads, or literature of the Vedānta. From this rich mine of spiritual thought, the great teachers of Vedānta have drawn their fundamental principles. They have carefully sifted the gold from the rough ore, and have put it before the world in a form that is more easily to be apprehended. Later teachers have still further simplified the language and the mode of expression, so that to-day we have a system of philosophy that is marvellous in its simplicity, yet sublime in its extent, covering, as it does, every field of religion and philosophy. Well may it be called universal, for it excludes none. It provides for every stage of development in that vast school of man which we call the world; from the veriest babe to the most advanced sage, a place is found for all, and in every babe Vedānta recognizes the sage that is to be. It does not, however, offer to the child the same lesson as to the youth, nor to the youth as to the man. It recognizes spiritual evolution just as plainly as the science of the West recognizes the physical and mental evolution.

If it be asked wherein lies the utility of this system, I think it can be shown that, even from the common, every-day standpoint, before we can hope to accomplish any radical good in the world, we must first learn the rationale of the world as far as possible, and that anything that can help us to an understanding of the underlying realities will necessarily help us in the task. The utilitarian philosophy of itself can never give us a satisfactory ethical sanction. It advocates altruism, but

cannot acceptably explain why man should prefer another to himself. The reason for this is obvious. The utilitarian system of altruism is founded on the observance of social conditions as exhibited in the past, and upon the inference that similar social conditions will always continue to exist. This assumption, in a world that actually exists only because of ceaseless change, is not really warranted by any facts known to us, and because utilitarian ethics is based upon an impermanent foundation, it is not satisfactory to the more philosophical minds, which demand a sanction founded on the eternal, the unchanging, upon that which, in its very nature, is "the same yesterday, to-day and forever." Nearly all the great religions of the world recognize this need for a permanent basis for ethics, and seek to supply it by placing the sanction for man's conduct to his fellowman in the commands of a supernatural Being. Each religion conceives the God it proclaims to be eternal and unchanging, but as the commands given by these supreme beings vary in different cases, there must be something behind these variations, something that does not vary. Again, this something that underlies all this variety, all this ceaseless change, must be One and Unchangeable. That One Existence the Vedântin calls the Self, the Atman, the Soul of every being. It is the real nature, the essence in every man. All differences are but the result of name and form, the universe is that One Existence, manifesting Itself in all the variety we see. In that Infinite Ocean every separate form of existence we see is but a tiny wave, never for one instant separate from the ocean behind. How can one wave injure another when all are the one ocean? As well the foot could hurt the hand and not expect itself to feel the pain. The *realization* of this real unity of existence would make impossible any desire for mere personal advantage. Every religion that teaches a happiness to be reached by some only, leaving the rest of mankind out, is good so far as it goes, but is necessarily partial and incomplete, and unfit for universal acceptance. Only that religion which is sufficiently philosophical to include *all* beings

(not only humanity) in its plan of salvation is capable of being universally adopted. The highest generalization does not contradict the lower ones, but includes them all, and is of necessity greater than any one of the generalizations it includes. To illustrate, when a man thinks of himself as John Smith, he has limited himself from all other men; when he expands his thought a little and regards himself as a citizen of New York (let us say), he has risen to a wider view of himself; he is then one among many; then, as belonging to the State of New York, he again widens his view; as an American he rises to a still broader view; as a human being, to a yet broader one; when he says he belongs to the animal kingdom, that is a wider generalization; when he says he is a living being, he includes yet more; and when he reaches the idea that he is a being, he has made the broadest possible generalization, because everything we can ever know, or think of, has being.

When we speak of the "Unknowable," we affirm that it *is*, and, in affirming that it is, we unconsciously relate ourselves to it, for we share with it that one last affirmation of the human mind, namely, being, or "isness." The idea then of "being," or existence, includes all lesser ideas, but neither contradicts nor antagonizes them, so the Vedānta Philosophy includes all others without denying them or saying they are wrong. It only says they have not yet reached the highest generalization, because that must include all the rest. As long as one is left out, there will be two and not one. Only when the one is reached, that final "One without a second," has the goal been attained.

All man's effort is directed to the endeavor to reach that One Unit Existence. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously, his whole life is an attempt to penetrate beyond the limits of the senses, a struggle to reach that final Reality that will leave nothing to be desired, that will bring him Bliss Absolute. Thus we see that religion is a necessity to man. It is the very spring of his every action, because all action has one end. Seeing all these various and apparently contradictory efforts

on the part of man, we have gradually come to regard some as praiseworthy, and to dignify them by the name of religion, while others seem to us so far astray that we class them as superstition, or as irreligion. The only satisfactory solution of all these seeming contradictions is to be found in a religion that has grasped the final unity and holds fast to that in all its teachings. That religion or philosophy that sees behind both good and bad, behind saint and sinner alike, the One Reality of which they are but better or poorer manifestations, that religion alone is fitted to become universal. The effort of Vedânta has been to find the golden thread of unity running through all the different religions of the world, no matter how conflicting or incongruous they may appear. In the Bhagavad Gîtâ, Krishna says: "I am the thread that runs through all these various ideas, each one of which is like one pearl." This means that behind all variety is unity, a unity eternally One and Unchangeable. All the apparent inharmony exists in the variety, and only appears there because the finite mind can only grasp a part at a time, because it has to see the limited, which, when separate from the whole and cut off, as it were, from what would complete it and make it symmetrical and beautiful, seems to us bad and terrible. When we see a beautiful child, for instance, we can admire it, but if some one should cut off a finger of that child and show it to us, we should shudder and turn away. Because we can only see the part, never the whole, this world will always present to us an insoluble problem. As long as one tiny part is lacking, the whole cannot appear, and we feel instinctive dissatisfaction because of the lack of that part. Until we can rise to a knowledge that behind all change is the Unchangeable, we are drifting like ships without compass or rudder, and all our attempts to help the world will be like putting water into a sieve. That is why religion is necessary to man, not *a* religion, but that essential something that constitutes religion itself. Of course, when we come to work this out into practice the results must vary. As Max Müller says, it will depend upon the character of the

race, or the particular person who elaborates it, what form any particular religion will take, and it will take color from the environments and experiences of those who profess it. That is why Vedānta does not deal with specific details, but leaves them to be worked out to suit particular needs. Once a man has *thoroughly* imbibed the broad principles of Vedānta, he may be safely trusted to find the way to apply them to individual cases. When he has learned to love his fellowman not only as his brother, but as an actual part of himself, there will be no danger of his injuring his "other selves." When the idea of the real unity of all life has become woven into a man's whole nature, when not only his head, but his heart, too, accepts this integral fact in human existence, then every action of such a man will be prompted by a love so universal that it may well be called divine, and that man can only act for the welfare of all around him. The universal love he feels will be all-embracing, and must produce in him unselfish action. This is the end and aim of religion as taught by Vedānta.

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